

Illicit marijuana grows decimate western wildlife



Illegal marijuana grows in the Sierra Nevada are hurting wildlife. Photo/Integral Ecology Research Center

By Benjamin Spillman, Reno Gazette-Journal

Tony Magarrell isn't very relaxed for someone who just spent a week in the lush backcountry canyons of Lassen National Forest, 165 miles northwest of Reno.

Magarrell, a special agent for the U.S. Forest Service, wasn't there to enjoy roaring waterfalls or abundant wildlife. He was cleaning up yet another illicit marijuana operation, a job that gives him a front-row seat to environmental wreckage most people will never see.

The bags of trash hauled out by helicopter provided evidence of the damage illicit grows can do to the environment. But the damage goes far beyond the trash left behind.

Both California and Nevada voters have recently approved

ballot measures to decriminalize marijuana possession and issue licenses for marijuana businesses. But it's too soon to tell if that will affect illicit grows in the Sierra Nevada and elsewhere. That's because the vast majority of what's grown illicitly is sold through black market channels, which still exist because most states and the federal government still consider marijuana to be illegal.

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